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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001349

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: CARETAKER GOVERNMENT PREPARES FOR ELECTIONS AND
TRANSITION; EXPECTS AWAMI LEAGUE VICTORY

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JAMES F. MORIARTY. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY
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¶1. (C) With the campaign period over and Bangladesh's 81 million voters prepared to cast their ballots December 29, the Caretaker Government (CTG) has its sights set on a peaceful transfer of power to its elected successor. The CTG expects to transfer power to the Awami League and its leader Sheikh Hasina within two weeks after the elections, according to Adviser Ghulam Quader. While acknowledging the importance of convincing the losing party to participate in the political process post-election, Quader said this will be the winning party's responsibility--not the CTG's. Meanwhile, Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed reiterated his commitment to maintaining the Army's neutrality and ensuring that all would be able to cast their ballots. The CTG Advisers and the Army deserve great credit for their efforts to lay the foundation for a better future for Bangladesh and its citizens.

CTG Predicts (and Hopes) Awami League Will Win Big
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¶2. (C) The Ambassador met with Caretaker Government (CTG) Adviser Major General (ret'd) Ghulam Quader December 27 to review preparations for the December 29 election. In addition to overseeing the Communications Ministry, Quader in recent months has been one of the CTG's principal negotiators with the political parties. During their hour-long meeting, Quader appeared relaxed and confident about the status of preparations for elections. He claimed not to know whether there had been a decision about allowing mobile phones to be used on election day. Quader said he personally favored shutting down the mobile phone networks but acknowledged there were other opinions. Quader denied reports the Advisers would meet with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Khaleda Zia and Awami League Leader Sheikh Hasina prior to election day to discuss the transition. Quader confided that his fellow Adviser, Hossain Zillur Rahman, had been out of line when he told the press such a meeting was in the cards. Quader claimed the CTG continued to accommodate the parties, including shifting the date of the Chief Adviser's final address to the nation (now scheduled for December 28) to allow the two former Prime Ministers to speak on the 27th.

¶3. (C) Quader told the Ambassador internal GOB surveys showed the AL gaining 180 of the 300 parliamentary seats up for grabs on election day, with the BNP winning 80 seats. The remainder would go to smaller parties and independents. If the results followed this pattern, the CTG planned to hand over power to Sheikh Hasina's government on January 10 after

a brief transition period. Quader noted the AL had proposed this date as it was the anniversary of Sheikh Hasina's father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's triumphant return to Bangladesh after the Liberation War in 1972. Were the BNP to win, Quader speculated the transfer of power would take place almost immediately--as early as December 30 (Note: This is a bit of hyperbole, since results will not be official for several days). Quader said the CTG would simply disappear after the elections. He told the Ambassador the Council of Advisers would hold its final meeting December 28 to take care of pending business, including his Ministry's project to grant a consultancy contract for the proposed Padma Bridge.

What The Future Holds =====

¶4. (C) Quader, a former head of National Security Intelligence during Khaleda Zia's 1991 - 1996 government, said the BNP's campaign strategy of running against the CTG had failed. Quader praised the Ambassador's public statements noting that preparations were underway for free, fair, and credible elections: these statements had undermined the BNP's attempts to claim the playing field was tilted in favor of the Awami League. Quader said it would be up to the winning party to convince the loser it had a stake in the process and should agree to participate in parliament. This was not something the CTG could do, he added.

¶5. (C) Quader emphasized the need for a future AL government to take a strong stand against terrorism. Quader admitted he had underestimated the strength of domestic militant groups. In fact, he said militants detained in recent days had

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confessed to plans to disrupt the elections. Quader said it would be important for the AL to maintain good relations with the Army. The Adviser said Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed had kept the Army neutral, which had helped the AL. Quader said he did not think Moeen would seek an extension after his term ended in June 2009. At the same time, Quader thought it would be useful for the AL to offer Moeen a position, for example as Minister of Defense, after his retirement.

¶6. (C) Quader predicted the AL alliance with the Jatiya Party would not survive long after the election. If the AL were able to form a government on its own, as the surveys predicted, Hasina would not be interested in giving anything to Jatiya Party President Ershad.

General Moeen Reiterates Pledge To Keep Army Neutral =====

¶7. (C) In a separate meeting December 28, General Moeen said he had given the Army strict instructions to remain neutral and to ensure that all were able to cast their votes. Army personnel would stay clear of polling centers and would serve as a reserve "strike force" if needed. The Ambassador congratulated Moeen on the constructive role the Army had played in creating conditions for elections. Moeen acknowledged this, and shared his belief that the Army would be able to develop an amiable relationship with the elected government. While there might be some shifting of senior personnel to accommodate the incoming administration's preferences, the Army would not suffer from the politicians' return.

Comment =====

¶8. (C) Quader and his fellow Caretaker Advisers deserve great credit for their efforts to bring Bangladesh's transition to democracy to a successful conclusion. Since mid-2008, they have shown admirable flexibility in accommodating the political parties' demands and have worked to create a level playing field for elections. At the same

time, they have continued to pass ordinances which, taken as a whole, help create a better foundation for Bangladesh's democracy. Recent polls show that the people of Bangladesh are beginning to look more kindly upon the CTG period. As time passes, it is likely the CTG era will look even better, unless the politicians are able to show that they have learned something from their time out of power.

MORIARTY